

Advent, the preacher always reminded us, begins in darkness. He had to say this every year because the lights were already strung, the trees in full glory, stores filled with crooners' white Christmas dreams. He said it's a hard task to follow the liturgical season in a culture full of Christmas pagans (his words, not mine, though as I grew older I identified more and more with those Christmas pagans).

He sometimes said he felt whipsawed between the two Decembers: somber and celebratory. Then he'd pause, proud of his alliteration. You might be forgiven for thinking he was jealous of the Christmas pagans and their happiness while he was trying to observe a solemn season.

But then he would remind us that there needn't be discord in that feeling of being pulled in two very different directions. The preacher died before Sting wrote *Hounds of Winter*, but I think he'd have liked the description of December as "a season for joy, a season for sorrow." He was comfortable with paradox and even outright contradiction.

Partly thanks to the preacher, the two Decembers feel natural to me. And I embrace both of them in equal measure.

As a Christian, Advent centers me in anxious longing for God's presence, for salvation from beyond the veil. It's a practice of the darkness so many people find themselves in, find in themselves, the lack of divine light. It's a time to experience the divine not as a comforting presence, but as an absence.

I remember sitting in the back of a darkened stone church one Christmas listening to a small choir rehearse O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. When they got to the verse calling on the "Desire of Nations," it struck me that this longing isn't limited to "captive Israel" or Christians. Desire of Nations speaks to the whole human experience, not just the individual heart in popular American religion.

In these six or so weeks, loneliness can seem more bitter. The artificial snow is matched by artificial cheer. We're supposed to know this as the most wonderful time of the year and for some, it simply is not. Advent invites participants to feel it.

The other December, the pagan Christmas that drifts closer to Halloween every year, challenges and comforts me, too.

The Scrooge in me wants to rail against this season of running from darkness toward artificial glowing incandescence, neon, and forgetting. The hearty good

wishes we exchange about Hanukkah, Christmas, Dwali, and Kwanza— even generic Holiday greetings— are an effort to press back the hollow feelings.

That preacher once that might be the best thing we could do in the face of lowering light and days cut short, seasonal depression and reminders of the happiness some do not share. In fact, he said, a great spiritual discipline for times like these might be a healthy dose of hedonism.

So shout the greetings you do not mean, sing the songs you do not feel. Eat the food, drink the drink, light the candles. Become a Christmas pagan even while you sigh through Advent.

Because none of us is ever just one thing. We carry in us the light and the darkness, the hope and the despair, the death and the life. Jingle Bells and Come Thou Long Expected Jesus can both herald this season.